

African Traditions in a Global Context

Helmut Danner

What is happening in the *encounter* of European civilisation with African cultures? We can understand this encounter in the sense of *globalisation* and, undoubtedly, this globalising process strongly bears the features of the *European mind-set*. What are its characteristics? How do they differ from *African social structures*, *African ethics*, and *African spirituality*? What does a globalisation with a European emphasis mean for *African traditions* and cultures? What does all this mean for the actual African-Western *relationship*?

These are not pure academic questions. Here in Kenya, each of us, being an African or being of European descent, is consciously or unconsciously daily affected by the encounter of two very different cultures ó in business, in work, in a shop, by using technical gadgets, in the traffic, in politics, etc. I am sure dozens of examples come to your mind immediately. I pick out only one: Traffic lights in Nairobi ó nobody stops when they show red. Traffic lights make sense in a European context where rules and laws *as such* have to be followed; but an African driver observes the whole traffic situation and what the other *drivers* are doing.

Globalisation is not an invention of the 20th century; it has a long history. However, the globalisation we are looking at and that accelerated after World War II, started with the discovery of the Americas and of eastern parts of the world and with the gradual occupation of Africa by Europeans. Those not only came for trade, but increasingly believed in having to fulfil a '*civilising mission*' through bringing European civilisation to Africa. This began in the 15th century and culminated through colonisation in the 19th and 20th centuries. Globalisation became a European enterprise imposing European ways of thinking, values, political organisation and, most obviously, European technology.

The European mind-set

At this point, we should ask what constitutes the *European-Western mind-set* as opposed to the African mind-set. With *mind-set* I understand the ways we think, how we perceive the world and the other person, which norms and values are guiding us. We will see that these mind-sets differ in the West and in Africa; they are the mental foundation of our different civilisations and cultures.

Let me demonstrate the European cultural and mental foundation by referring to a person that I find fascinating, namely Galileo Galilei. He lived from 1564 to 1642 and was ó what we would call today ó a natural scientist, specifically an astronomer. Following the teachings of Copernicus, Galilei maintained that the Earth moved around the Sun and not the Sun around the Earth ó which was the teaching of the Church.

What is specific and new in Galilei? He used his *senses*, his *reasoning*, his *logical thinking*, to discover and to prove astronomic and other physical facts. By that, he opposed traditional teaching and, in particular, the Church authority. He as an *individual* used *his* reason and challenged the authority of a community, the Church. Although he did not win in this confrontation during his life-time, at the end, an *individual's reason* proved to be the reliable source for the truth against the teaching of the authorities.

These are essential European characteristics: *reason and individualism*. They belong closely together. Also, we have to notice the shift of *authority*: from an institutional authority (here the Church and the Inquisition), from a doctrine, in a certain sense from a belief, to the reasoning of an individual. At the same time, it is the authority of reason as such.

In the 18th century, reason and individuality became the guiding principles in Europe. "Think independently!" and "critique" were slogans and keywords. All aspects of life were critically scrutinized. The Church as an institution was questioned and religion as a whole destructed. Disadvantaged social classes were to be liberated, for example serfs, workers and women. Absolute monarchies were toppled like King Louis XVI of France who at first had to agree on the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and finally was executed at the guillotine in 1793. During this time, science and technology gained importance and spurred the industrial revolution.

The 18th century is known as the era of the *Enlightenment*. It appeared in different forms and ways in England, France, and Germany. Probably the best known event was the French Revolution of 1789 with its ideals: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. Kant, the German philosopher, proclaimed the *dignity* of the human being and formulated the *Categorical Imperative* by which every human being is guaranteed equal rights. And the poet Friedrich Schiller announced with pathos: "All humans become brothers!"

With these ideals, with this pathos, with the self-confidence and self-importance to be at the top of human development and to be entitled to bless other peoples with the new accomplishments, the Europeans established *colonies* all over the world.

The African mind-set

The Europeans put their emphasis on reason and individuality. This led to the achievements and ideals of the Enlightenment; and this dramatically changed the understanding of religion, the state power, and the society. It boosted sciences and technology. As opposed to this European constellation, how do we have to depict the *African mind-set*, the African understanding of the human being and of the world? I will try to show this by looking at the African social structure; at the related ethics; and the African spirituality.

The European society is constituted by individuals; the unique individual, who has an inborn dignity, is the basic element of the society. Contrary to this concept, John Mbiti describes the *African society* as such:

"The African individual can only say: *I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.*"

In other words: the community is the basic foundation; the individual's origin and existence lie in the community. The individual draws his power and his dignity from the community; the community provides his existence and his identity; he represents it. I am, I exist, because I belong to a community; because you and my family, my clan, my tribe exist, this is why I have my existence.

The African social structure starts at the *community* and this has to be understood as a *concrete* community: the extended family, the clan, the tribe. This community has a *hierarchical* order. The older people enjoy the obedience and the respect of the younger ones; the woman is subordinated to the man. It is the *elders* who have the final say in the concrete

community. In addition, the father and the elders entertain a relationship to the ancestors; therefore, they are respected not only in a social, but also in a spiritual sense. Beside this vertical-hierarchical order, there is a *horizontal* bond and commitment among the age-groups. For instance, for the Kikuyu this is the group of those who were circumcised and initiated at the same time. This horizontal bond of commitment refers to the whole tribe.

The single member belongs to, is owned by, the clan. For instance, this shows when somebody ó like the late lawyer S.M. Otieno ó does not want to be buried on the compound of his place of origin but in the city where he has worked for all his life. However, the clan will enforce, even by court, that the rules of the tribe will be respected ó the burial will happen at the home of the deceased even against his will.

Another example for the predominance of the community over a single member is a wedding. Also, marriage is not a private matter. According to the contemporary Kikuyu custom, the extended families of the groom and of the bride visit each other before the wedding, for instance, to negotiate the dowry. (Bride and groom are not involved in this negotiation; they are represented by elders of their clan.) The bride's extended family wants to see to where their daughter will be going... The visiting clan will bring food in baskets and the receiving family reciprocates the gifts. Both clans act as *groups*, perhaps fifty or more persons on each side, not as individuals. This shows, for instance, in the sitting order: í The individuals of the two clans do not mix as each clan is seated togetherí This cursory description demonstrates how the family, the clan, the community, is in charge and not the individuals. The bride not only becomes the wife of the groom, she will also be an integral part of the groom's family; she *belongs* to it. She has left her original family.ö

What does this social structure ó where the community and not the individual is the foundation ó mean for *African ethics*? There is a nice Luhya proverb that summarizes the whole ethics:

Shienyu ni shienyu khali shihunyi bukundu.

Your brother is your brother, even if he stinks.

The member of the family, of the clan and of the tribe is my brotherø It is enough that we belong together through our community and, because of that, I have an obligation towards him. I have to support him ó even if he stinksø for instance, even if he is involved in a crime. This shows: it is not abstract norms and laws that guide the moral behaviour but it is the *other person* in the context of a concrete community. Ethics is a matter of a personal relationship which has preference.

Recently, together with some Kenyans, I had to negotiate with a contractor. The residents of an apartment building were considerably disturbed by the construction that happened until late in the night and during the weekends. The aim was to convince the contractor to stick to acceptable working hours. The Kenyans explained to him how they were disturbed in their sleep and that they could not rest during the weekend; he should understand their situation and certainly it would be possible to find an acceptable solution. Thus, the Kenyans tried to find an agreement on a *personal* level. And what did I say, after so many years in Kenya still the German? öThere are laws and regulations that you have to follow!ö The difference between an African personal approach and the Western abstract-normative orientation could not have been demonstrated in a more obvious way. (I maintain that this is the reason why traffic lights don't have a chance in Nairobi.)

The third aspect of African mind-set that I want to mention is *spirituality*. I mean its traditional forms that are practiced beside Christianity and Islam. Traditional spirituality has many manifestations: veneration of ancestors, curse by father or mother, oath taking, witchcraft to harm somebody and witchcraft as a protection, sorcery, witch-doctors and healers, devil worshipping, etc., also mixtures with Christian and Islamic practices. If a child dies, if cows get sick, mostly elderly women or men will be blamed to have bewitched the child or the cows; witches are persecuted and killed; in the north of Ghana there are villages that serve as refuges for elderly women because they are suspected to be witches; not so long ago, we read reports about the killing of albinos whose body parts were used for occult practices; recently, a witchdoctor in South Africa is said to have convinced mine workers that they were invisible and invulnerable in their fight ó but 34 miners were killed. The spiritual practices in Africa and the stories about them are innumerable.

Westerners have problems to take these forms of spirituality as serious and consider them to be superstition, nonsense or imagination. However, there are strong effects caused by witchcraft; people become healthy or sick or they die because of a curse or an oath. Westerners should simply try to accept and to respect that this spirituality is *real* for Africans. For, according to John Mbiti

“The physical and spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe. African peoples see that invisible universe when they look at, hear or feel the visible and tangible world.”

In other words, the spiritual is part of *this* world, is a *different view* on this world in which we live and act. The spiritual, the spirits, the ancestors are present in this world and they *act* in this world. The spiritual power is permanently and everywhere present.

How does globalisation affect African traditions?

We can now compare the African and the Western mind-sets that encounter in the process of globalisation: The concrete community is the foundation for the African individual versus the European society that is based on individuals; the brother the other person, is the norm for the African ethical orientation while the European ethics has its orientation in abstract norms; in the African context, the non-physical spiritual power is ubiquitous and part of *this* world versus the European religion that assumes a God in the hereafter, in *another world*, and in addition, the Enlightenment has destructed religion as deism and atheism.

What do these essential differences mean for African traditional ways of life? Is tradition getting lost? These questions cannot be answered without considering the *historic reality*. For, the encounter between the West and Africa is not an abstract event; it is not an exchange of ideas; but it has a lot to do with *power*, with politics and economics. On the one hand, the Europeans of the 18th and 19th century felt to be on the top of the human development and to be obliged to bless other peoples with their achievements, inspired by ideas of *liberty, equality, and brotherhood*.

On the other hand, the civilizing mission of the colonisation *betrayed* these ideals of the Enlightenment. Instead of liberty, the Africans experienced *suppression*; instead of equality, they were *discriminated against*, and instead of being treated as brothers, they were *exploited*. We notice now that our topic is not just an academic one; it demands that *we* define

our personal standpoint *today*. Up to this day, Westerners have to ask themselves critically whether they realise liberty, equality, and brotherhood towards Africans or whether they practice suppression, discrimination, and exploitation. Is it astonishing when Africans have perceived the European attitudes as *arrogant* that have to be met with *distrust*? But today, Africans have to ask themselves how they can react to the European betrayal of their own ideals in a *constructive* way. Among others, this could mean to remember African tradition.

We have to recognize the *historic reality* and facts: About 11.5 million West Africans were shipped to the Americas in the transatlantic *slave trade* ó however, Africans must admit that the Europeans used an *existing* African slave market and that it was *Westerners* who fought for the abolition of slavery. With respect to African culture, the *missionary* must be blamed for having interfered with the basic traditional beliefs of Africans and to have negated African customs. At the Berlin Conference of 1884/5 the African continent was divided among the Europeans. This was the time of *colonisation* when suppression, discrimination and exploitation of Africans were brought to perfection, e.g. in the apartheid system. We must admit that apartheid not only existed in South Africa but, for example, was also practiced in Kenya.

I try to answer my question: What do the essential differences between European and African mind-sets mean for African traditional ways of life ó namely, individualism versus community, brotherhood versus abstract norms, and spirituality of *this* world versus a religion of and for *another* world?

(1) We cannot separate those differences from the historic reality that involves the execution of political and economic powers and personal forces. But it is very important to *understand* these differences in order to understand each other better.

(2) The European ideals were distorted because of those power factors. Africans were confronted with the ugly face of the Europeans, not only with their ideals.

(3) Western influence has negated and changed African traditions. The fight against female circumcision is one contemporary example.

(4) The more recent globalisation with a strong American and economic component is sweeping all over the world and, for instance, introduces technological developments. Africans willingly accept and apply this technology. The mobile phone is only one, though outstanding, example that has changed modern life in Africa tremendously.

(5) For these reasons, African traditions no longer exist in a pure form. Taken as symbols, we can say that the -Villageø the -Homeø still is a stronghold of tradition, and that the -Cityø appears to be a melting pot of traditions and modernity. But even in the -Cityøthe -Villageø is present; traditions are still alive there, though maybe in adapted forms.

(6) Insofar traditions represent what is *meaningful* for the life of Africans, they can and will co-exist with global modernity that is limited to materialistic and organizational progress.

What does all this mean for the actual African-Western relationship?

My thesis, based on observations, is: *The relationship between Africans and Westerners is disturbed*. Westerners still display conceit against Africans in many forms; Africans resent this and withdraw in distrust and their own ways of conceit. This disturbed relationship is

caused, one, by the mutual history of slavery and colonialism as well as by the contemporary conduct of the West against Africa and, two, by non-understanding of the basic differences.

I am pleading for an effort by Africans and Westerners to be willing to *understand* the other side as well as the own. Understanding is a prerequisite for acceptance; acceptance is a prerequisite for respect. Only mutual respect can correct a disturbed relationship.

Concerning the *common history*, mainly the African side should try to be *pragmatic*. All the negative experiences of slavery, missionary, and colonisation can no more be undone. Also, history and globalisation have two faces: the negative one and another one that I want to formulate with this speculative and provocative question: Where would Africa be today if the Portuguese had not set foot on Africa, if the Europeans would have kept away from the continent up to now, if missionaries would not have introduced reading, writing, and health care, if Western technology among other things would not have been introduced to Africa by the colonialists? Would Africa be ready to join the globalised world of the 21st century through her own efforts and achievements? Or could Africa avoid being part of the globalised world? In other words, does the ugly face of colonisation not have the constructive side of *preparing* Africa ó though also by force ó for the globalised world? I know that these questions are not only speculative, but also provocative for Africans. But on a pragmatic standpoint these questions have to be asked and answered. I am also aware that there is no black and white answer. The relationship of Africans to the West follows two images of the West: admiration and distrust. One wants to be like Westerners and have the same things; they are perceived as -betterø And the Europeans and Americans have to be distrusted because they want to patronize and exploit Africa. These two images ó admiration and distrust ó need to be reconciled; something that only Africans can do.

Public and personal daily association between Westerners and Africans are still tainted by Western conceit and patronizing. The Westerners have to give up their attitude of know-it-all, of teaching and preaching, and have to start to listen. If they could forget their imagined superiority they would notice that Africans, given the same chances, are not less capable, intelligent and successful than themselves. The African brain drain to the West proves the high qualifications Africans have; otherwise they would not get a job in the West. The Westerners should understand and accept that the *real damage* they have inflicted on Africa is a *mental* one, namely to *deny Africans dignity*. This damage is great compared to the material and physical losses. The Western alleged superiority has justified the transatlantic slave trade, mission, and colonisation. It still justifies the patronising attitude of development agencies and Western governments towards Africans; some foreign ambassadors excel in it. As a start, the West should have the decency to acknowledge the harm that it has done to Africa.

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